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Batman's Burden: A Director Confronts Darkness and Death

CHICAGO-A dreary office plaza at Wabash Street and the river, late afternoon. A mist blows in from Lake Michigan. Producers and idle actors huddle under a flimsy canopy; grips hastily unfold another over their high-priced gear. A few stories overhead, a stunt double in a familiar black-caped costume swings from a hoist, slamming into a window in a Mies van der Rohe tower that we shall imagine is Gotham City Hall. A noose is around his neck, a knife plunged into his heart.

The meaning is clear: Batman, or at least his döppelganger, is dead.

Christopher Nolan, the director of "The Dark Knight" — the follow-up to his 2005 franchise reboot, "Batman Begins" — is unperturbed by the rain, but a tiny detail irks him. "Hey, buster!" he shouts to the stuntman, craning his neck skyward and raising his voice for the first time all day (politely, as ever, but enough so he can be heard). "Could you turn yourself a little more to the left?"

In so many ways this isn't what you'd expect of a $180 million Hollywood comic-book movie sequel with a zillion moving parts, a cast of thousands and sets from here to Hong Kong. Anyone else would shoot indoors, use digital effects or wait for clear skies; Mr. Nolan rolls with the weather's punches, believing that the messiness of reality can't be faked. Another filmmaker would leave a shot like this in the hands of a second-unit director, but Mr. Nolan doesn't use one; if it's on the screen, he directed it, and his longtime cinematographer, Wally Pfister, worked the camera. Stars on any other movie would have fled to their trailers to wait in comfort until needed again. Here, Gary Oldman is watching and shivering along with everybody else, cracking jokes to keep warm.

Yet Mr. Nolan, 37, has barely changed his approach to filmmaking since his 2000 indie-smash "Memento," the film noir in reverse starring Guy Pearce that Mr. Nolan's brother, Jonathan, dreamed up, and Christopher Nolan made for $5 million. "A movie is a movie," he says. So he's still scribbling new dialogue on the set, improvising camera moves as he goes, letting his actors decide when it's time to move on and otherwise racing through each day as if his money might run out. It's just that his jazz combo of a crew has mushroomed into a philharmonic — with whole new sections of prosthetics artists, special-effects wizards and so on. "But we're still all riffing off of him," Mr. Pfister says.

That kind of maestro is just what Warner Brothers wanted five years ago when it hired Mr. Nolan to restore a jewel of a property that had become a laughingstock with Joel Schumacher's 1997 reviled "Batman and Robin," best remembered for George Clooney's nipple suit.

But any risks inherent in giving over such a huge franchise, with so much history and potential, to an auteur untested at making blockbusters were outweighed by the need to re-establish credibility with Batman's alienated fan base. "If the people who make the film aren't taking it seriously," Mr. Nolan said, summarizing fans' view of the 1997 movie, "why should we?"

Now the question is whether Mr. Nolan's vision of Batman can not only maintain its hold on the imaginations of comic fans and critics, but expand its reach to a wider summer moviegoing audience, even as the death of Heath Ledger, who played the Joker in "The Dark Knight," has added unanticipated morbidity to the film's deliberate darkness.

But if Mr. Nolan was feeling any stress on the set in Chicago last year, his easygoing reserve concealed it. Dressed, as always, in his own somewhat formal uniform — dark blazer, waistcoat, French cuffs; a thermos of tea in hand; a wireless video monitor around his neck — he also seemed a bit of a throwback. While many filmmakers watch in seclusion on television screens, he stood next to the camera, always on his feet unless he was kneeling to whisper in someone's ear. "Acting is such a vulnerable thing, you don't want to be told in front of others that you've made a mistake, or 'Try this,' " said Aaron Eckhart, who plays Harvey Dent, a district attorney. "Chris understands that."

But then, it hasn't been so long since Mr. Nolan bootstrapped himself into the film business, cobbling together bits of 16-millimeter film stock with $6,000 to make his first feature, "Following" (1998), over a year's worth of weekends. "Memento," which came next, was a critical smash, and with Steven Soderbergh's endorsement, he landed his first studio assignment: directing Al Pacino and Hilary Swank in "Insomnia" (2002) on a $50 million budget.

That fall, after slaving over a screenplay about Howard Hughes only to have Martin Scorsese beat him to the punch, Mr. Nolan put together a passionate 45-minute pitch for rewinding the Batman saga to its beginning. Alan Horn, Warner's president, approved it on the spot. "Besides his excitement about the story he wanted to tell, he just brings a certain weight and credibility," said Jeff Robinov, the studio's No. 2 executive, who had first tried to interest Mr. Nolan in "Troy."

Three times the cost of "Insomnia" and far greater in scope, "Batman Begins" catapulted Mr. Nolan into the top tier of mainstream filmmakers. Critics mostly loved it, though some seemed to resent him for leaving the indie world behind. While not an overpowering blockbuster, with $205 million in domestic box office, it expanded the audience for Batman well beyond comic fans. And it gave Warner Brothers a superhero who could hold his head up next to Sony's Spider-Man and Fox's X-Men.

His Caped Crusader, Christian Bale (who also starred in Mr. Nolan's entr'acte between the Batman films, "The Prestige"), recalls how "people would kind of laugh" when they heard that he and Mr. Nolan were taking Batman seriously. But when they finally saw the film, the same people "would say, 'What a surprise,' " Mr. Bale said. "I believe that even the most popcornlike movie can be done incredibly well, and can have something that you really have to work at. That was what attracted me to doing it the first time, because I felt I'd never seen that done, and I didn't understand why."

It's enough to make a marketing executive cringe, that the word "dense" pops up in conversations with Mr. Nolan and his actors. But it's true: "The Dark Knight," which will be released on July 18, is jammed with characters, plot and action. It picks up where "Batman Begins" left off, with Mr. Oldman's police lieutenant, Jim Gordon, warning about the perils of escalation: that Batman's extreme measures could invite a like response from the criminal element. And sure enough, a deadly new villain, the Joker, emerges to wreak havoc.

In a political context this would politely be called an "unintended consequence." (Gotham as Baghdad, anyone?) Mr. Nolan doesn't deny the overtones. "As we looked through the comics, there was this fascinating idea that Batman's presence in Gotham actually attracts criminals to Gotham, attracts lunacy," he said. "When you're dealing with questionable notions like people taking the law into their own hands, you have to really ask, where does that lead? That's what makes the character so dark, because he expresses a vengeful desire."

In Mr. Bale's view "The Dark Knight" is an even lonelier outing for his character, who once naïvely thought his crime fighting could be a finite endeavor. "This escalation has now meant that he feels more of a duty to continue," he said. "And now you have not just a young man in pain attempting to find some kind of an answer, you have somebody who actually has power, who is burdened by that power, and is having to recognize the difference between attaining that power and holding on to it."

It may not be too much of a stretch to see another analogy here for Mr. Nolan: Rebooting the Batman franchise may be behind him, but he still has to improve upon it. Sequels are always trickier. And now he must also navigate the aftermath of the Jan. 22 death of Mr. Ledger.

It came well into editing, and only after the studio had introduced Mr. Ledger's Joker through posters, trailers and a six-minute Imax short. But it automatically raised the stakes: the acclaimed actor's final role would be ... a comic-book grotesque? Worse, though Mr. Ledger had finished work on "The Dark Knight" in October and was already halfway through another film, news that the prescription drugs that killed him included sleep aids — along with narcotics — prompted Internet chatter about whether his intense performance as the Joker, styled after Malcolm McDowell's in "A Clockwork Orange," had been a factor in his demise.

Mr. Ledger, however, also called it “the most fun I’ve ever had, or probably ever will have, playing a character.” But his fatigue was obvious, said Michael Caine, who briefly overlapped with him. “He was exhausted, I mean he was really tired. I remember saying to him, ‘I’m too old to have the bloody energy to play that part.’ And I thought to myself, I didn’t have the energy when I was his age.”

Mr. Pfister, the cinematographer, said Mr. Ledger seemed “like he was busting blood vessels in his head,” he was so intense. “It was like a séance, where the medium takes on another person and then is so completely drained.”

Will Mr. Ledger’s death cast a pall over “The Dark Knight,” whose tragic plot turns already make it much darker than “Batman Begins”? “We’ll see,” said Mr. Robinov, of Warner Brothers. Mr. Nolan, for his part, said he felt a “massive sense of responsibility” to do right by Mr. Ledger’s “terrifying, amazing” performance.

“It’s stunning, it’s iconic,” he said. “It’s going to just blow people away.”

All the talk of darkness obscures what may come as an aesthetic surprise in “The Dark Knight”: the creepy shadows and gothic Wayne Manor are gone, replaced by sleek towers, shiny surfaces, bright lighting and the vistas of a city with shoulders bigger than Batman’s. “I’ve tried to unclutter the Gotham we created on the last film,” said Nathan Crowley, Mr. Nolan’s production designer. “Gotham is in chaos. We keep blowing up stuff. So we can keep our images clean,” setting a solitary hero against the vastness of Chicago.
Mr. Nolan said he tried to make “Batman Begins” realistic by taking Wayne out of Gotham for portions of the story. For “The Dark Knight” he wanted Gotham to seem straight out of the news. “We just let everyone know up front: this is a location movie,” he said.

Mr. Nolan does his planning in his own tricked-out lair: a converted garage behind his home near the Hollywood hills (and just down the street from the Batcave entrance in the campy 1960s television series). There he and his producer-wife, Emma Thomas — who gave birth to their fourth child last September — gathered with Mr. Crowley, Mr. Pfister, the costume designer Lindy Hemming and other department heads to brainstorm. It’s where Mr. Crowley designed the tanklike Batmobile known as “the Tumbler,” where Ms. Hemming came up with a uniform that finally let Mr. Bale turn his head at the neck and where she first pitched the idea of the Joker as Johnny Rotten.

If he barely uses storyboards, let alone the computer-animated “previsualization” wizardry common to effects-heavy films, Mr. Nolan is on the cutting edge with one technology. He used the unwieldy Imax cameras to shoot about 30 minutes of “The Dark Knight,” including the entire opening.

“We’ve been trying to talk filmmakers into doing this for nearly 40 years,” said David Keighley, an old Imax hand. And even after a Steadicam collapsed under the weight of an

Imax camera, Mr. Nolan held firm. “If David Lean could carry a 65-millimeter camera through the desert,” he said, “why shouldn’t we be able to do this?”

“It scares people a bit,” Mr. Nolan says of what could be called his planned-out impulsiveness. “We just go and shoot the stuff, and see what looks the best and what works. But on a big movie, you actually have more freedom. You can say, ‘O.K., it’s 3 in the morning — can we get the police to close down that street?’ ”